

Park Flight: Connecting people and protected areas through technical exchange

by Carol Beidleman

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THE SCENE CAPTURED THE ESSENCE OF THE PARK Flight Migratory Bird Program. In the tropical rainforest of Pico Bonito National Park in Honduras, three biologists from the United States and three interns from Mesoamerica were reunited in November 2002 for a workshop to improve knowledge and coordination of migratory bird monitoring programs across the hemisphere. These internships, coordinated through the NPS Office of International Affairs Volunteers-in-Parks program, provide an opportunity for technical and cultural exchange and enhance opportunities for collaboration on migratory bird conservation.

The international cooperation sparked by such programs is critical for the success of species that spend part of the year in one country and part of the year in another. Innovative programs like Park Flight are important for keeping resource managers abreast of issues that might affect migratory species at either end of their journey. Initiated in 1998 and enhanced by funding from the Natural Resource Challenge, Park Flight is a partnership among the National Park Service, the National Park Foundation, American Airlines, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the University of Arizona CESU (see page 34).

Park Flight international interns reunite with biologists from the United States at a workshop in Honduras to coordinate migratory bird monitoring programs across the hemisphere. Pictured from left to right are Alexis Cerezo (Guatemala), Rachel Mazur (Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park), Belkys Jimenez (Panama), David Mizrahi (New Jersey Audubon Society), Edgar Castañeda (Nicaragua), and Bob Kuntz (North Cascades National Park); missing is Phil Correll (New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail Route). Each Mesoamerican country's Park Flight grantees received new binoculars at the workshop, donated by Optics for the Tropics. Park Flight is dedicated to conservation of migratory bird species in U.S. and Mesoamerican national parks and protected areas.



At the Honduras workshop, several of the interns gave an overview of their national park experiences. They are all biologists who manage bird conservation programs in their home countries. Alexis Cerezo from Guatemala spent 10 weeks at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, where he and Miguel Ramirez banded birds at Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship stations, conducted backcountry monitoring, and gave interpretive programs. Alexis said it was “the most beautiful place he had ever seen in his life” and expressed appreciation for the trust accorded to him by NPS Wildlife Biologist Rachel Mazur.

Edgar Castañeda from Nicaragua, one of three interns hosted by North Cascades National Park, assisted with a Cornell Citizen Science bird monitoring project, helped plan a migratory bird exhibit, and gave a presentation to Spanish-speaking families from Skagit County. He said Bob Kuntz and the other staff at North Cascades “treated him like family.” Belkys Jimenez from Panama interned with the New Jersey Audubon Society and New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail Route, where she assisted with interpretive walks, songbird banding, and hawk counting. She left New Jersey eager to start a hawk-counting station in Panama. Each of these activities gave the interns an opportunity to increase their understanding of migratory bird management in the United States and improve their English skills. Both the interns and host parks found the exchange experience professionally and culturally rewarding.

Another important component of the Park Flight Program is providing technical assistance to Mesoamerican bird conservation projects, with NPS expertise matched to needs identified by Mesoamerican partners. In 2002 Park Flight gave technical assistance in five Mesoamerican countries, coordinated through the NPS Office of International Affairs. Eric Finkelstein of Amistad National Recreation Area, Texas, provided interpretive expertise for the development of bird-watching trails in El Imposible and Montecristo National Parks in El Salvador. At the same time, Steve Burns, a landscape architect with the NPS Long Distance Trails Office in Santa Fe, New Mexico, designed a bird-watching route between these two national parks to promote avitourism. Another NPS landscape architect, Kevin Percival, developed a site plan for a visitor reception area at Mombacho Volcano Natural Area, Nicaragua.

Environmental educators Roy Simpson, from Tumacacori National Historical Park, and Sarah Koenen, from George Washington Memorial Parkway, provided training and recommendations for the Panama and Mexico Park Flight projects, respectively. Edgar Castañeda received technical assistance in Nicaragua the previous year. The Park Flight Program made it possible for him to participate in activities at both ends of the migration route, completing the migratory bird management and monitoring link across the hemisphere. ■

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